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ABSTRACT

Elementary and secondary teachers are recognizing that today's children are products of a visual era who bring visual literacy to their school language learning. Visual resources may be developed and used as a valuable motivational technique. The following programs utilizing this approach are outlined: Dorothy Lopez' development of polaroid picture-taking to stimulate special education children; Debes and William's "pictures first, then words" reading programs for bilingual children; Miriam Offenberg's use of slide-sound productions in visual composition; and Judie Vishonski's inclusion of slide-sound productions, super-8 movie film, and black and white photographs as writing stimuli in her curriculum for seventh-graders. (KS)

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DEVELOPING LANGUAGE VIA VISUAL LITERACY

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> They're going to teach my son to read next autumn. It's time and he knows it. He already reads fallen leaves, puddles, things the builders left, cat-personalities, and how-the-distantly-viewed-mountains-feel-today better than I do.

With these words, Sam Sabesta (1971, p.156) describes his visually literate six-year-old who is about to enter the ranks of the verbally literate, more commonly defined as those who can read and write print. Barley (1971) draws an interesting analogy by defining visual literacy as the ability to read and write using visual tools. We live in a visual world of wonderful sights and colors which may be experienced either directly or indirectly through pictures, film, and television. Yet as teachers we are usually so concerned with developing the verbally literate child, that we often ignore the natural literacy he may bring with him to school from his visual environment. This is frequently an untapped resource which may be extended and used to develop language skills.

Visual literacy emerged as a serious concern for educators after the first National Conference on Visual Literacy, held in Rochester in 1969. The proceedings (1970) presented definitions, a rationale, research, and descriptions of on-going school programs. They made stirring reading, offering new insights and promising new ways of working with children

in an age of advanced visual technology. Wondering what had happened since those "cabbage days" I was quite disappointed when I reviewed the recent literature and found only a handful of items and very little new information. However, I didn't stop there but continued my search into the schools themselves to find that visual literacy is, indeed, alive and well and flourishing in many classrooms as creative teachers are employing visual literacy techniques in their language programs, often without being aware of the term or the movement that grew out of the Rochester conference six years ago.

Special Needs and Bilingual Children

In New York City, Dorothy Lopez runs a summer program for special education children. An important component features instructing the children in polaroid photography so that they can record highlights of field trips for later discussion and language experience stories. The immediacy of feedback supplied by the polaroid pictures helps to sustain newly developed oral vocabulary and concepts for these special needs' children. Back at school, they dictate their stories about their pictures to teachers and aides who record them in print for each child's own photo-story book. These are used as individualized readers to help maintain and further develop reading skills.

Debes and Williams (1971, p.33) describe several similar "pictures first, then words" reading programs being used with such special populations as bilingual children in the Montebello School District in Southern

California and Indian children in Canyon Chinle, Arizona. They say:

> The method is basically the language experience method, but with pictures adding a powerful new element. . . . The combination of making pictures, acting, speaking, and then using the photos as visual cues to the verbal language that has been connected with them helps the children make very solid progress in learning reading skills (1971, p.33).

Again in New York City, Miriam Offenberg gave her Spanish-speaking third-graders instammatic cameras to photograph scenes from their neighborhood. Converting these pictures into slides, she used them to promote oral-aural English. When it came time for her class to put together a Christmas assembly program, a slide-sound production seemed only natural. Each child contributed at least one slide, and the class coordinated the scenes with Christmas songs. Most of the pictures represented Christmas in the city: store windows, wreaths on traffic lights, even a local bodega with a Santa Claus advertisement on its door. To accompany their own singing of "Good King Wenceslaus," the children appropriately chose slides taken on a class trip to the Cloisters, a reconstructed medieval monastery. These children, for whom English was a second, yet-to-be-controlled language, were able to compose visually, expressing a theme by interweaving their photograghs with familiar English lyrics.

Visually Literate Seventh-Graders in Suburbia

One of those teachers to whom the term "visual literacy" was new, Judie Vihonski has been extending and developing both verbal and visual

skills in her seventh-grade language arts classes in the Valley Middle School, Oakland, New Jersey, in several ways. Individuals or small groups compose slide-sound productions around a theme, usually expressed in a favorite pop tune. For example, Anna shot scenes of people helping people in the school environment (the nurse, teacher, older children with those younger) and arranged them to fit the words of the song, "Lean on Me." Ann and Cathy chose to capture such scenes as sunsets, their classmates at play, interesting faces, and blooming plants and flowers to accompany "Everything Is Beautiful."

These seventh-graders also employ simple animation techniques to compose single concept and story cartoons using the super-8 movie camera. Alan, Neale, and Bob collaborated on an animated alphabet film, "Alphabetoons," using cut-felt letters and simple figures that move across a flannel board to the tune of "The Entertainer." Carol developed a concept film called "Circle" to visualize visual shapes for primary children. "Freddy Frog's Great Adventure," drawn and filmed by Mark and John, and "The Day Rudolph Lost His Nose," executed by David and Robert, are wordless cartoon fantasies that delight young viewers. These embryo filmmakers involve their audiences by encouraging them to tell the story as the drawings flicker across the screen, thus helping the younger children to grow in visual perception and oral language. (Directions for these animation techniques appear at the end of this paper.)

Ms. Vihonski also uses some of David Sohn's (1964) ideas by offering her own mounted, black and white photographs as writing stimuli, thus

reversing the process the children used in making slide-sound and super-8 productions. Instead of communicating by means of visuals, they now write expressively to tell the picture's story.

The photos of people in various urban settings elicited empathetic and perceptive responses from even the most reluctant writers. They wrote of the loneliness and anxiety that lay beneath the clown's smiling face, of the sadness and frustration conveyed by the figure of the dejected man leaning despondently over the impersonal city's park fence, and of the fear and futility of a homesick soldier. The power of the visuals seemed to unleash the power of the children's written language. Samples of their poetry and poetry-like prose follow.

Clown

His life is like a kaleidoscope, always changing. Underneath that happy, painted face is a serious attitude. This clown's job is to make people happy -- but how happy is he? Hours grow into days, and years go past. Who is he? Perhaps he does not know.

Maureen Mutter

Hiding behind a painted smile
. . . thinking
Where will I be tomorrow?
What will today be like?
Is this what my life is going to
Be like, going from day to day
Never knowing where I'll end up -- or how
I will be.

Laurie VanderVliet

Sadness

Leaning over the fence crying
Showing his emotions
Feeling lonely
Sadness affects everyone.

Mark Vandenbos

Unhappiness

Last iron picket fence
A man of unhappiness
He feels very dreary
Ron Hoffer

Trying to escape
From the noisy, crowded park
To tranquility
Carol Shindler

The Soldier

Just sitting there, feeling sorry for himself. He thinks about his family at home; he suddenly grows homesick. His wife lives each day wondering if her husband is all right. She only keeps in touch with him through letters. He ponders over the thought of going out on the battlefield.

Fear is taking over him. The lump in his throat grows enormous, and the butterflies in his stomach seem to get bigger. His life is so confused.

Cindy Frank

Incidentally, the composition about the "soldier" was elicited by a photo of an explorer scout, who just happened to be oriental, in fatique clothing amidst troop gear on a Staten Island ferry. The writer obviously brought her visual experiences with the war in Indo-China to her interpretation of the picture. This incident lends support to Fillion's (1973, p.308) argument for visual literacy programs that prepare students for our highly visual culture. The viewer must realize that " . . . much of what he sees has been processed and filtered through someone else's perceptions first." While this deceptive photo had no "correct" interpretation in this case because it was being used to stimulate free, expressive writing, the children could learn from it that modern media can distort reality, sometimes intentionally, for political or propaganda purposes.

Other Applications of the Slide-Sound Technique

While these Oakland seventh-graders are using slide-sound to express general themes, high school students in Enfield, Connecticut, (Debes and Williams, 1974, p.35) were challenged by their teacher to choose any subject in Social Studies that interested them and produce a slide-sound work for class and school use. Known as the Lab Cart program, the approach required that the students go into the community for research purposes, organize, clarify, and translate ideas into visual terms. Eventually, they did move into print, producing journals and yearbooks which were used in the school, community, and even by a social agency, The National Association of Mental Health.

Social Studies students at Park East High School, a non-traditional community school in New York City, made slide-sound documentaries for a unit study on immigration (Cummings, p.37). The students gathered pictures and memorabilia from family albums and taped interviews with relatives and friends to produce "Family Roots," dealing with the arrival in New York of Jews from Europe, blacks from the South, and both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans from the island. In effect, they wrote their own text with visuals and taped reminiscences.

Television and Reading

Both the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Mount Vernon, New York, school systems are experimenting with using videotapes of popular commercial

shows like "Sanford and Son" and "Kung Fu" to help reluctant readers learn to read (Feeley, 1975). Middle-grade/Junior- High students, who have low achievement scores or who can read but don't, view the video-tapes and then immediately read from the scripts, assuming the various roles. In this way, the readers bring a good deal of information about the language of the text to their reading and motivation is high.

The children learn video language (zoom, teaser, pan) and filming techniques (close-up, "shooting up" to create dominance) as they view and read favorite shows, combining growth in visual and verbal literacy. They learn to interpret body language and kinesics, for example, Red Foxx produced a "grimace" in a toothache segment, and his face more than adequately defined the word!

While Mount Vernon has decided to concentrate on reading skills, the Philadelphia approach develops a whole range of language skills around the visual experience. Besides the activities with the commercial tapes, the children research, write, dramatize, and film their own shows, learning to read nad write through both film and print.

Conclusions

More and more, teachers in the mid-seventies are recognizing that our children are products of a visual era who bring a good deal of visual literacy to their school language learnings. School does not have to be a print-dominated experience but can combine both the visual and the verbal to be a natural extension of our visual culture. From the examples cited in this paper, it is evident that teachers, whether or not they are

conscious of the visual literacy movement, are using photography, film, and videotape both to extend children's native visual literacy and to help develop verbal literacy in the language areas of speaking, reading, and writing.

Ms. Judie Vibonski's Directions for Simple Animation Films

Equipment

Super 8 movie camera
Tripod
Backboard
Construction paper or felt

Procedure

Camera and backboard are placed at a 90 degree angle for sharpness
Several frames (8) are taken of each setting
Objects are moved ½ inch between shots.

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RESOURCE PEOPLE

Lopez, Dorothy: Assistant Director, Bureau for Children with Retarded Mental Development and Director of "Summer Program -- Academic Skills -- ESEA Title I," Board of Education of the City of New York.

Offenberg, Miriam: A-V Coordinator, Fort Lee Public Schools, Fort Lee, New Jersey.

Vihonski, Judie: Teacher, Valley Middle School, Oakland, New Jersey.

Author's Note

This paper was supported by samples of the visuals mentioned:

1. Polaroid pictures taken by the Special Education children (Lopez).
2. Christmas slide-sound production (Offenberg).
3. Slide-sound, super 8 animations, black-and-white photographs and children's responses (Vihonski).